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C O N F I D E N T I A L PANAMA 001210

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/17/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PM](#)  
SUBJECT: PANAMA: NEW POLL OUT

Classified By: POLCOUNS Brian R. Naranjo. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) While Democratic Change (CD) President and presumed presidential candidate Ricardo Martinelli maintained a comfortable lead in the polls and dominated the opposition, the real news of Dichter and Neira's latest poll was the near two-fold jump in undecideds "don't knows," and "didn't answers." Panama City broadsheet daily La Prensa published the results of Dichter and Neira's July 6-8 poll on July 16. Other notable results included:

- Minister of Housing Balbina Herrera's comfortable lead among governing Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD) presidential hopefuls;
- the continued floundering of First VP and FM Samuel Lewis, President Martin Torrijos' preferred successor, in the polls;
- the significant slip of former President Ernesto "El Toro" Perez Balladares in the polls losing nearly half of his support to end up at a paltry 3.8 percent support, and
- Panamenista Party President Juan Carlos Varela's loss of two-thirds of his support since March placing him with a meager 2.5 percent support among opposition options.

According to this poll, the race for the PRD presidential nomination is between Herrera and Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro while the race to lead the opposition is between Martinelli and former President and Moral Vanguard of the Nation (VMP) President Guillermo Endara. Still twenty-two months from the May 2009 elections, there are still party conventions to be held and formal candidacies to be announced though. In short, there is still plenty of time and political space for this race to change and develop. End summary.

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And the Winner is . . . Martinelli, but Undecideds Grow  
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¶2. (U) Democratic Change (CD) President and presumed presidential candidate Ricardo Martinelli came out the winner in this poll with 22.7 percent, a slip of 2 percentage points since March 2007. The real news of this poll was the remarkable growth of undecideds, "did not knows," and "did not responds" from 12.6 percent in March to 23.9 percent in

July, a jump of 11.3 points. Governing PRD member and Minister of Housing Balbina Herrera polled 16.7 percent, down 0.7 percent from March. PRD member and Mayor of Panama City Juan Carlos Navarro dropped 6.7 points to 12.7 percent. Former President and leader of the Moral Vanguard of the Nation (VMP) Guillermo Endara gained a little ground, only 0.8 points, ending up at 8.5 percent. Meanwhile, PRD member and former President Ernesto "El Toro" Perez Balladares saw his support cut nearly in half from 7.4 percent in March to 3.8 percent in July. The following candidates did not beat the margin of error of the poll (2.9 percent): Panamenista Party President Juan Carlos Varela (2.5 percent), perennial presidential aspirant Alberto Vallarino (2.0 percent), and PRD member and First VP and FM Samuel Lewis (0.7 percent). All candidates except Endara, however, suffered a slide in the polls ranging from 0.2 to 6.7 points as undecideds increased nearly two-fold.

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Herrera Leads Government Candidates  
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¶3. (U) Herrera led governing PRD party prospects taking 26.8 percent on a closed question regarding PRD presidential hopefuls only. Navarro trailed Herrera by 7.1 points securing 19.7 percent on this question. Perez Balladares (5.8 percent), Lewis (1.3 percent), and former Minister of Agriculture Laurentino Cortizo (0.6 percent) lagged significantly behind Herrera and Navarro. A total of 10.9 percent responded indicated they supported none of the candidates.

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Martinelli Dominates Opposition  
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¶4. (U) In a closed question regarding the opposition's presidential prospects, Martinelli was head and shoulders in the lead with 34 percent, a slip of 3 points since March. Endara garnered slightly more than one third of Martinelli's support with 12.6 percent, a slip of 2.5 points. Alberto Vallarino, who recently announced he was debating whether to join the Panamenista or the Patriotic Union (UP) party and who has not announced his candidacy, jumped two full points to 6.2 percent. Varela meanwhile lost two-thirds of his support plummeting from 15.1 percent in March to 4.9 percent in July. Respondents indicating "none" jumped 10.7 points to 11.1 percent while "did not know or did not respond" grew 3.6 points to 27.9 percent.

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Technical Data  
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¶5. (U) Dichter and Neira Latin Research conducted this poll from Friday, July 6 through Sunday, July 8. The sample size was 1,218 face-to-face interviews. The universe of possible interviewees included all Panamanians over the age of eighteen residing in Panama. The sample was 49.7 percent female and 50.3 percent male, 69.5 percent lived in rural areas and 30.5 percent lived in urban areas, and 31 percent indicated a political party affiliation and 69 percent did not. The level of error, confirmed by re-interviews of an unknown number of those polled, was plus or minus 2.9 percent.

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Comment  
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¶6. (C) The big news in this poll is the growth in undecideds and those who indicated no preference for any of the presidential options. Increasingly, voters are in a grumpy mood confronted by the increasing cost of goods and services (e.g., gasoline, electricity, the basic food basket), the perception that the GOP is not doing anything on key issues (e.g., public transportation, investigation into the diethylene glycol deaths), and a weariness with politics and

government as usual (e.g., the spat between the Supreme Court and the Attorney General, perceptions of ineptitude in the police, continued education problems). Navarro told Ambassador July 16, "There is a general sense of malaise." Voters took out their bad feelings on all politicians. To date, we have seen no indication that President Martin Torrijos is prepared to step back from his support for Lewis to be his successor; this poll will raise more questions about Lewis' viability, however. Also, Varela's precipitous drop in the polls will undermine his ability to struggle at the helm of the Panamenista party, let alone launch a presidential campaign. Martinelli, the one candidate that other opposition parties do not mention in their musings about opposition alliances, continues to dominate the opposition panorama begging the question of how long other opposition parties believe they can refrain from parlaying with Martinelli. The next watershed in the political calendar will be the various party conventions, all of which except the PRD's, will be held in August and September.

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